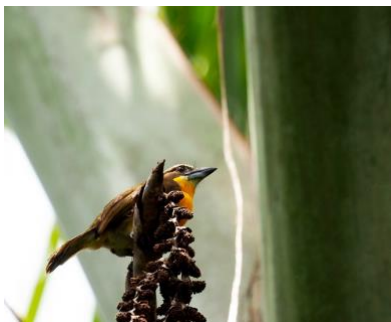


Amazon River Cruise: Northeastern Peru

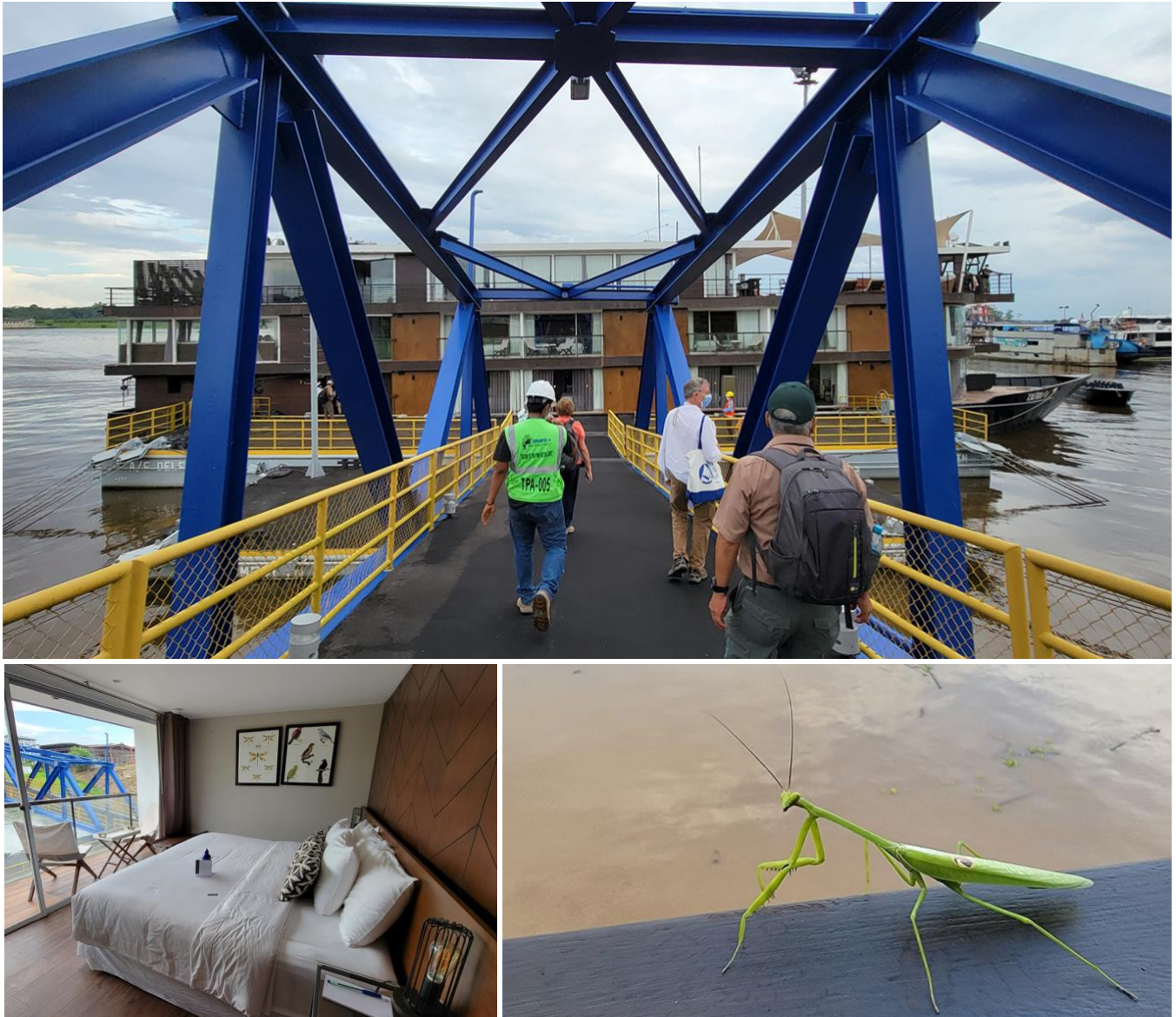
Nov. 13-20, 2021 | By Steve Shunk



With guide Steve Shunk and participants Brenda, Cynthia, Elizabeth, Jean, James, and Tom



The legendary Amazon River conjures images of the quintessential tropical jungle. The greater Amazon Basin supports some of the world's greatest diversity of flora and fauna, and it represents the largest watershed on Earth. Many of the basin's specialty birds can be found in the lush lowland rainforest, and this is the subject of our story. This past November, we embarked on a journey to explore the main-stem Amazon and two of its most important tributaries: the Ucayali and Marañón Rivers. We started in Iquitos, Peru, and spent a week aboard a luxury riverboat, making many excursions up the smaller tributaries of these three rivers. We saw primates, caimans, river dolphins, and plenty of birds. It is my pleasure to share the highlights of our adventure!



Sat., Nov. 13 Arrivals | Iquitos | Amazon

We met at the Swissotel and enjoyed a delicious dinner together in downtown Lima, in the San Ysidro district. The next morning, we took an early shuttle to the Lima airport and hopped a plane to Iquitos. After a 90-minute flight, we landed in the urban center of Peru's Amazon rainforest. We were part of a larger group, and we had to wait for a few other arrivals, so we spent a couple of hours at the DoubleTree Hilton hotel. Eventually, one of our three guides for the trip met us at the hotel, and we all took a bus ride to the port near the mouth of the Itaya River, at its confluence with the Amazon. Here, we boarded the Zafiro.

The Zafiro—This luxurious live-aboard cruise boat was the perfect vehicle for exploring the Amazon. The air-conditioned rooms and lounge gave us ample respite from the warm humid climate, although the weather during our stay was quite tolerable. The dining room was classy, and the food was first class. The boat even has an exercise room and hot tub, though our group agreed that a hot tub wasn't exactly the kind of amenity one would desire in the tropical jungle!



On our way down the long boat ramp, we saw Purple Gallinule on the shoreline and a line of Neotropic Cormorants stretched across a mooring line. Once on the boat, we got a comprehensive orientation by the cruise director and enjoyed our first of several delicious buffet lunches. Ready for some birding, we headed for the front deck, where right away we picked up our first Black-collared Hawk and Russet-backed Oropendolas. We also found the first of what would ultimately be thousands of White-winged Parakeets. Roadside Hawk and a few Oriole Blackbirds were seen by all. Cruising upstream on the main-stem Amazon, we caught fleeting glimpses at a couple of three-toed sloths and an Amazonian Umbrellabird. After a beautiful sunset, we took a short break and enjoyed our first dinner on the boat. All breakfasts and lunches were buffet-style, but dinner each night comprised a well-portioned five-course meal.

Sun., Nov. 14 Yacapana Island | Yanayacu and Marañón Rivers

We were all up early for our first morning on the boat, and we started with an excellent raptor show. We again saw the handsome Black-collared Hawk, along with many Yellow-headed Caracaras and a Black Caracara, as well as a Peregrine Falcon eating a mouse. Besides the raptors, White-winged Parakeets and oropendolas were conspicuous in the trees, with several Cooi Herons and one Capped Heron on the shoreline. We heard a Pale-legged Hornero and saw several Yellow-rumped Caciques and a few Oriole Blackbirds. White-winged Swallows and Gray-breasted Martins hawked for insects over the river, with Forked-tailed Palm-Swifts overhead. We had our first of many Tropical Kingbirds and Great Kiskadees, as well as our first Scarlet-crowned Barbet. Kingfishers would prove to be daily highlights and we started with the giant Ringed Kingfisher. Other early morning highlights included several Large-billed Terns, a single Spotted Sandpaper, several Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and Speckled Chachalacas calling from the jungle.

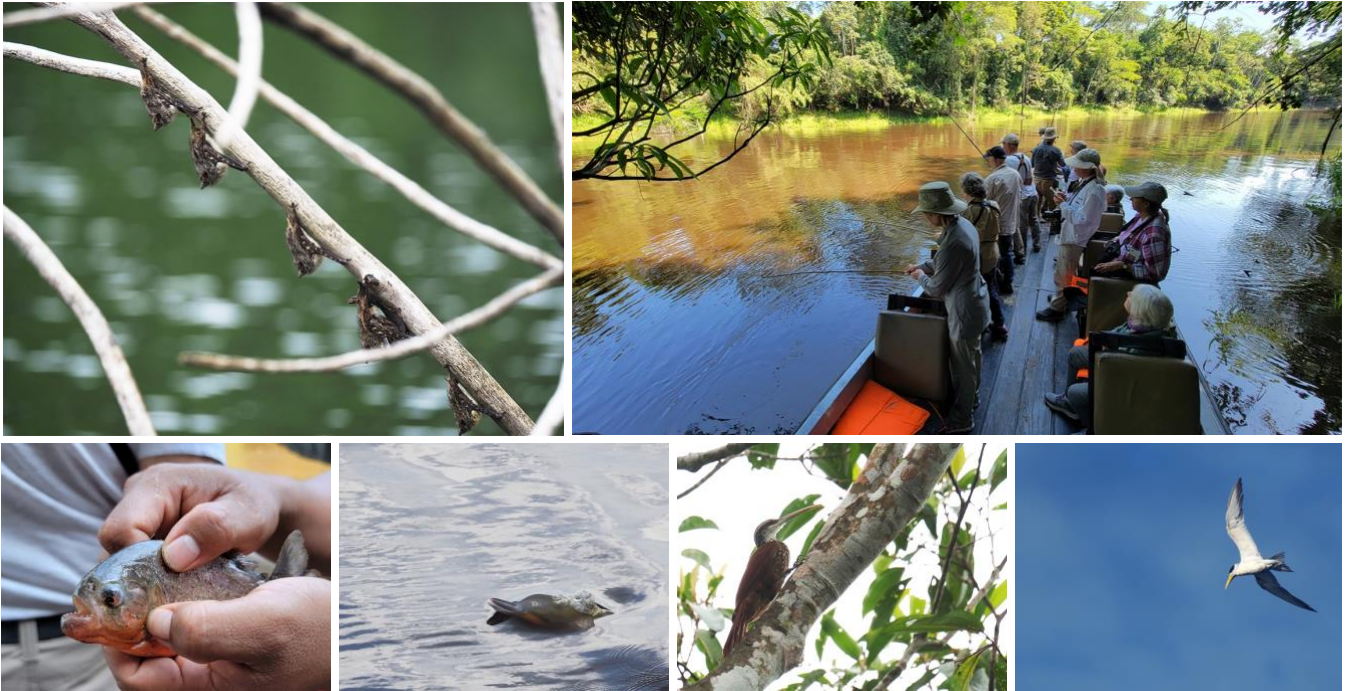
After breakfast, we embarked on our first outing aboard one of the small skiffs that accompanied the Zafiro. We headed up a couple of tributaries and into a small lake, where we enjoyed some excellent encounters. We saw our first gray river dolphins, or tucuxis, and our first troop of spider monkeys. A black caiman splashed behind us but eluded good looks. We had several Yellow-headed Caracaras and another Black Caracara, plus Horned Screammers and couple of kingfishers. Black-capped Donacobius showed well and proved to be a recurring highlight of the tour. Our first woodpecker was a giant Crimson-crested. We had good comparisons of Lesser Yellow-headed and Turkey Vultures, and we spotted our first Great Black Hawk. For a nice comparison, we saw



both Large-billed Tern and the much smaller Yellow-billed Tern. Our pleasant sunny morning was rounded out with a couple of Smooth-billed Anis and several swallows. We took a mid-day break, which would become a daily ritual, staying out of the sun during the heat of the day. Our afternoon and evening outing brought us several highlights, including a couple of Dusky-headed Parakeets and a Gray-capped Flycatcher at the spot where we had earlier picked up some baby turtles to be released later in the trip. Red-capped Cardinal and Masked Crimson Tanager gave us our dose of bright red birds for the evening. Mammals also featured well this evening, with two pygmy marmosets in a tree, greater sac-winged bats in the shadows, and good looks at pink river dolphins, or botos. Birding at sunset and dusk featured bulldog fish-eating bats, Sand-colored Nighthawk, and an overwintering Common Nighthawk. A Muscovy Duck flew quickly over the boat. We were able to see a small black caiman up close and personal, as well as a couple smaller caimans. We watched a Common Potoo perched inconspicuously atop a snag before it flew off for some food. On the dark ride back to the Zafiro, our guide spotlighted many Boat-billed Herons along the shoreline.

Mon., Nov. 15 Yanayacu | Marañón Rivers

As we waited on the lower deck for our morning excursion, a Black Skimmer dashed across the black-water river, while a Striated Heron stood on floating log and the tucuxis swam all around the boat, feeding on small fish. For the first outing of the day, we headed up the black-water Yanayacu River. Before we got very far from the Zafiro, all the skiffs enjoyed great looks at a flock of Hoatzins low in the trees along the shore. It was also a morning of macaws, and we had especially good looks at Red-bellied and a pair of Blue-and-yellow Macaws, with a fleeting glimpse of a single Red-and-green Macaw. The whole tour group enjoyed the experience of releasing the baby Amazon turtles that we had picked up the prior day. We saw quite a few botos, and many Large-billed Terns along the way, as well as several Swallow-winged Puffbirds, Southern Rough-winged Swallows and a single wintering Cliff Swallow. We had cursory looks at Amazonian Umbrellabird, when a single bird flew over the skiff.



The morning also produced several Social Flycatchers, with flyovers of Dusky-headed Parakeets and Festive Parrots. We heard a woodcreeper and a Barred Antshrike in the jungle, and we had lots of kingfishers this morning, mostly Ringed but also several Amazon Kingfishers. The afternoon was occupied by a series of presentations in the lounge, giving us a great overview of the geography and ecology of the Pacaya-Samiria Reserve, which is wedged between the mouths of the Ucayali and Marañón Rivers.

Tues., Nov. 16 Iquitos Creek | Marañón

We had an outstanding morning of birding today, starting with an early boat ride along the shore of the Marañón and into Iquitos Creek. We saw our first Trogon—an Amazonian—as well as Green and Ringed Kingfishers, Magpie Tanager, and Piratic Flycatcher. We came back to the Zafiro for breakfast and then took the skiffs to a shoreline trailhead, where we headed out on our first forest hike. We walked along a large pond and onto a low ridge, where we birded around the remnants of a defunct resort, now overgrown with jungle vegetation. Right away we had both Strong-billed and Long-billed Woodcreepers, with especially good looks at a pair of the latter. Our main target species on this walk was the Maroon-tailed Parakeet, and we weren't disappointed, with several birds seen well in the relatively low canopy. After the walk, we paddled out onto the pond in a couple of makeshift catamarans—basically, two canoes connected by a couple of mounted wooden boards. A Lesser Kiskadee was unfazed by our presence and fed very close to the craft. We also found a small group of roosting long-nosed bats, which became an almost daily find on our outings. Perhaps the most challenging bird of the morning was an Undulated Tinamou that was calling incessantly—very close to us—but we never got our eyes on this elusive bird.

After the forest and pond, we boarded our skiff and motored into a narrow inlet with tall grass for a change in habitat. We enjoyed excellent looks at Chestnut-bellied Seedeater, Yellow-hooded Blackbird and both Giant and Shiny Cowbirds. We had great experiences with a territorial pair of Red-and-white Spinetails and a gregarious pair of Black-capped Donacobius, not to mention another Horned Screamer and a few heron species. After lunch and a break, we had a fun afternoon outing on *terra firme*, walking into a stand of thick, wet rainforest. It was a relatively short hike, but the experience gave us a taste of old-growth tropical jungle. We had the assistance of a local ranger who wandered through the forest on either side of the trail looking for special



animals. We saw very little from the trail itself, but the ranger located some great specimens. He first found a large Amazonian tarantula that we were able to examine closely. Next, he found a fluffy little Great Tinamou fledgling, one of a brood that he had been monitoring in the area. And finally, we got excellent looks at a handsome red-tailed boa, likely the nominate subspecies of *Boa constrictor*. Adding to the experience, the sky was quite dark, and thunder pounded around us, making the whole scene very dramatic! It was really one of the best experiences of the tour.

Wed., Nov. 17 Marañón | Pacaya-Samiria Amazon Lodge

On our morning outing on day five, we went for a short walk around the grounds of the Pacaya-Samiria Amazon Lodge. The habitat was excellent for birding, with patches of jungle vegetation interspersed with open grassy areas and a large pond. We had our best looks of the trip at Scarlet-crowned Barbet, and we spotted a little White-lored Tyrannulet in the top of one of the trees. We enjoyed excellent looks at a couple of singing Yellow-browed Sparrows as well as a flock Blue-gray Tanagers. We were also treated to some fun lizards and butterflies on the grounds. We started the afternoon boat ride with a pair of Drab Water Tyrants along the shore. We had earlier dismissed many small nondescript birds flitting along the riverbanks, so it was nice to finally get good looks at these subtly attractive birds. Just around the corner from the moored Zafiro, we headed into the mouth of Pahuashiro Creek. Black-billed Thrushes called from inside the jungle as we watched a young, Black-collared Hawk. We enjoyed excellent looks at Black-fronted Nunbird, two Greater Anis, a couple of Short-tailed Parrots, and a Plumbeous Pigeon. Quietly motoring along, we got close to a cluster of oropendola nests hanging in a tree. Yellow-rumped Caciques and many Southern Rough-winged Swallows crisscrossed the creek, and a big developing thunderstorm loomed in the distance. And it all started with two Cream-colored Woodpeckers



Thurs., Nov. 18 Dorado and Ucayali Rivers

Our first morning outing on day six was early, before breakfast, and took us up Yanallpa Creek, off the Ucayali River. We had more good looks at all three kingfishers—Green, Ringed, and Amazon. We got very close to a Varzea Shiffornis on the riverbank, with Chestnut-eared and Lettered Aracaris overhead. The raptor show included Slate-colored Hawk, a couple of Great Black Hawks, and a Crane Hawk. Grey-fronted Dove was calling most of the morning, and we saw a Ruddy Pigeon in the woods. A small macaw flew over, possibly a Chestnut-fronted. A Sand-colored Nighthawk roosted on a tree branch, and a Black-throated Mango hummingbird fed in a flower bank above the river. We had good looks at two jacamars—the Bluish-fronted and White-eared. We had good looks at our only Lineated Woodpecker for the trip, and folks in one of the other skiffs showed us a handsome Chestnut Woodpecker excavating a nest cavity.

After breakfast, our second outing was short and sweet, and it was a good thing, as the weather had turned rather hot and sticky; we were very happy to come back a little early. Despite the short trip up Cocona Creek, we still enjoyed some fun birds. We heard the loud Dull-capped Attila and got good looks at the Amazon subspecies of Squirrel Cuckoo. A Barred Antshrike quickly responded to our brief playback. Lesser Kiskadees fed along the shoreline, and a pair of White-eared Jacamars sallied for aerial insects from the tops of the trees. A pair of Red-and-white Spinetails, a large feeding group of Jacanas, and a sunning White-headed Marsh-Tyrant rounded out the morning. Our afternoon outing was especially productive with a ride up the Dorado River. Earlier we had seen Gray-headed Hawk, but the afternoon brought us several Black-collared Hawks and a Roadside Hawk, along with a pair of Spot-bellied Woodpeckers. We also saw several Red-capped Cardinals and found a couple of Black-tailed Tityras. There were plenty of kiskadees—both Great and Lesser—as well as several caciques and oropendolas. We had good looks at a Green-backed Trogon just before sunset. The sky darkened quickly, but we got to see a Green Ibis fly in before we lost our light as several Black-fronted Nunbirds chattered up in the trees. We pulled a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl out of the woods and saw it against the dusk sky; shortly after, a vocal Amazonian Pygmy-Owl responded to our playback from a distance. As we motored back toward the Zafiro, our guide was able to spotlight a Common Pauraque, and we heard several calling around us.



Fri., Nov. 19

Yarapa and Ucayali Rivers

On our final full day of birding, we entered the Yarapa River and found lots of caciques and a couple of Red-capped Cardinals. Another Red-and-white Spinetail was seen near mouth of the river. We found several White-eared Jacamars, as well as our first look at a Paradise Jacamar. A female Fan-tailed Antbird zig-zagged across a small inlet, giving all of us great looks. Our guide spotted a Purple-throated Fruitcrow perched low over the boat, and we found our only Thrush-like Wren. While several blue morpho butterflies coursed along the river, we watched Blue-and-yellow Macaws and Blue-winged Parrotlets overhead. Raptor highlights included more Black-collared Hawks and a young Great Black Hawk. Perhaps the biggest highlight of the morning was our discovery of a mixed flock of songbirds that contained several tanager species. Among the more common Blue-gray and Masked Crimson Tanagers, we also found Palm Tanager, Blue Dacnis, and a few Paradise Tanagers, along with fleeting glimpses at Turquoise and Green-and-gold Tanagers.

After our last buffet lunch, we took our standard afternoon break, followed by our final evening boat ride—this time back on the main stem of the Amazon River. We had our best looks yet at a small group of Speckled Chachalacas clumsily climbing through the trees. We spotted a barrel of spider monkeys cavorting in the jungle and were immediately distracted by a flock of Red-bellied Macaws that flew into a set of palm trees along the shore. We watched the macaws for quite a while as they plucked and ate palm fruits together. As a fitting

farewell, we stared in awe while many large flocks of White-winged Parakeets flew over the river on their way to evening roost sites.



Sat., Nov. 20

Iquitos to Wildlife Rescue Center | Departures

We awoke on our final morning with the Zafiro moored across the river from the Iquitos port. After the short skiff ride to the dock, all the boat passengers boarded the tour bus and took a drive to the Amazon Rescue Center. The Dallas (Texas) World Aquarium operates this facility, among several other conservation projects in Latin America. The Iquitos wildlife center is best known for rehabilitating Amazonian manatees so that they can be released back into the wild. We enjoyed a guided tour of the property, which included up-close looks at young manatees, several macaws and parrots, and many little monkeys running around at our feet. We saw the resident three-toed sloth and got a nice introduction to the white-sand habitat of the region. Finally, we headed back to Iquitos for our return flight to Lima.

WILDLIFE SUMMARY

- 162 bird species, including 14 different flycatchers and 16 raptors.
- An impressive list of 23 species that were found on at least 6 days, including: Horned Screamer; both Greater and Smooth-billed Anis; Yellow-billed and Large-billed Terns; Black-collared and Roadside Hawks; Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers; Yellow-headed Caracara; White-winged Parakeet; White-winged Swallow; Russet-backed Oropendola; Yellow-rumped Cacique; Oriole Blackbird; and Silver-beaked Tanager.
- Three-toed sloths and long-nosed bats on five days each, plus lots of spider monkeys.
- Excellent looks at the iconic river dolphins, the pink boto and gray tucuxi.

Photo Credits: Turtle Guide Group (Steve Shunk - SS), Scarlet-crowned Barbet (SS), Water Taxi (SS), Polka Dot Tree Frog (SS), Boarding at Zafiro (SS), Zafiro Room (SS), Mantis (SS), Sunset (SS), Yellow-headed Caracara (SS), Cocoi Heron (SS), Capped Heron (SS), Banana Boat (SS), Water games (SS), Black Caiman (SS), Long-nosed Bats (SS), Yanayacu Fishing (SS), Piranha (SS), Gray Dolphin (SS), Long-billed Woodcreeper (SS), Large-billed Tern (SS), Giant Cowbird (SS), Boa (SS), Boat Birders (SS), Black-capped Donacobius (SS), Yellow-browed Sparrow (SS), Boat Sunset (SS), Ringed Kingfisher (SS), Moon (SS), Umbrella boat (SS), Lesser Kiskadee (SS), Chestnut-eared Aracari (SS), Birding on the river (SS), Black-fronted Nunbird (SS), Blue-and-yellow Macaws (SS), Red-bellied Macaw (SS), Defunct Ferry (SS), Frog Rescue (SS), 88 Butterfly (SS), Yellow Headed Sideneck Turtle (SS)